

VILÉM FLUSSER Petrol crisis.

It may be considered a crisis of Western civilization. It forces the West to abandon Israel, which is an Occidental bridge head. It shows that Western economy can be manipulated by outsiders who control raw materials which the West itself has discovered and developed. It demonstrates that life in the West still depends immediately on natural facts like petrol, although the aim of Western civilisation is to control nature and make man independent on it. Now if one considers the petrol crisis to be one of Western civilisation, one can look at it from various angles.

For instance dramatically: The heroic fight of the Jews against forces which are out of their reach falls exactly within the scheme of Greek tragedy. The fragility of Western economy which is due to its extreme complexity is an illustration for "hybris" and the fall of the Titans. The dependence of values like "freedom of locomotion" on material factors like oil wells, and the fact that to take advantage of that freedom implies the exhaustion of the material it depends on, is a reminder of the vengeance of the Gods, ("moira"). In sum: if looked at dramatically, the crisis shows its aspects of "tragedy", "hybris" and "moira", its mythically Promethean aspects.

Or for instance optimistically: The Arabs are driving Europe into uniting to become the Third Great political power. The lack of petrol will provoke the invention of new energy sources and start a new economic "miracle". It will bring about the abandon of the motor car and thus force Occidentals to create an ecologically sounder way of living. In sum: if looked at optimistically, the crisis appears as a challenge that will reinforce Western civilisation.

Or for instance morally: The crisis shows that blackmail is an efficient method of persuasion at present. It shows how highjacking works: the blackmailed one, (the West), tends to blame the highjacked more than the highjacker, (the Jews more than the Arabs). It shows that the historical rape of the World by the West is a reversible process. It shows that there is a kind of mechanical justice: The more one system is being exploited by another one, (for instance the Near East by the West, or Nature by Man), the more it can destroy its exploiter. In sum: if looked at morally, the crisis illustrates Verfel's saying: "Not⁺ the murderer, the victim is guilty".

Or for instance structurally: The crisis shows that the economic structure which determines the political structure is itself determined by acts which are more or less chaotic. (The acts of the United States and the Soviet Union are determined by an economy vulnerable to acts by people motivated by various outlandish ideologies.) It shows that cultural structures are determined by economic structures which are determined by natural structures which are determined by hazard. (Skiing is determined by gas which is determined by petrol which is found by accident in the Middle East and not in the Alps.) In sum: the crisis shows that all hierarchies of structures, (infra- and superstructures), are highly problematic.

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Such ways of looking at the crisis are no doubt interesting. That is the reason why the European press brings them almost daily. But there is another way of looking at the crisis which I have not, so far, found in the press in any satisfactory form. (Possibly because it is not in the interest of those who control and direct the press, nor is it in the interest of those who write and read it.) Nonetheless, I believe that it should be discussed widely, if the crisis is to be understood in its permanent impact.

The petrol crisis is an unprecedented event in the history of Western civilisation. For the first time it becomes concretely evident that there are limits to technological progress. All the petrol will be gone in a few years with or without Arabs. Events of the same kind will follow in the future: the copper, the paper, the tin, the water crisis and so forth. All of them will make blackmail attractive, and all of them will lead to substitute material, but this is not important. The important thing is that it will be crises like these that will mark technological progress in the future. I shall consider the reason why this fact represents a crisis for Western civilisation.

Approximately two thousand years ago a project was being developed on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean to consider nature as raw material for technical manipulation. Approximately four hundred years ago methods were found which are appropriate for such a project. Approximately two hundred years ago those methods began to be applied to nature. During all this time there always were people who questioned the wisdom of the project. But nobody questioned its feasibility, because such a question would have been futile. The success of the project was too obvious. But now, for the first time, the feasibility of the project of Western civilisation is open to question.

Not, of course, theoretically. Theoretically technology can advance without limits, because the number of objects in nature which can be manipulated technically is enormous. But practically we may have reached a point from which to advance in the same direction, (toward an increasing number of objects), might become unreasonable. The effort to do so might become greater than any benefits derived from it. In this practical sense we may be approaching the exhaustion of natural resources.

At this point it might be wise to reconsider the basic concepts of the project. The concept of nature as a human object, the concept of man as a subject of nature, and the concept of culture as naturalized man and humanize nature. Reconsider those concepts, not only in theory, but in concrete terms like parked cars on Sundays. Such a reconsideration might help us to understand the impact of the crisis, and our future commitment to Western civilisation. I shall give two examples of the directions into which such a sort of reflexion might lead us.

The so-called "Third world" movement, as it began to articulate itself in Algiers recently, starts from the premiss that the "Third world" is being

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manipulated by the other two worlds as if it were an object. Now if it is true that objects are becoming scarcer, therefore more valuable and open to the method of blackmail, there is an obvious strategy for the "Third world" movement. First to accept that one is an object, then to press for tactical advantages stemming from this, and then invert the relationship between the various "worlds". Now does this mean that the movement aims at annihilating the Western project? Or at transferring it to the "Third world"? Or at substituting it by some other project? And how does the movement face the problem of the limits to technological progress?

Two other movements, the so-called "hippie" movement, and the so-called "New Left", seem to start from the premiss that the aim of technical manipulation is not so much to change the objects that are being manipulated, but the men who manipulate them. Therefore the two movements, (each in its own way), seem to advocate a new direction for technical progress. Less toward the manipulation of material objects, and more toward objects like feelings and ideas. Now does this mean that these movements aim at annihilating the Western project? Or at transferring it on a new level? Or at substituting it by some other project? And how do these movements face the problem of the limits to technological progress?

Obviously there are many more examples in our present scene of how the crisis of Western civilisation, (which articulates itself concretely in the petrol crisis), is being experienced and reacted to all over the world. The new thing about it is this: The underdeveloped, the hippies, the New left, (and philosophers, the Club of Rome and so forth), experience the crisis and react to it as if it were a question of the immediate future. The petrol crisis shows that it is present. Therefore it is now possible to experience it and react to it concretely. The question: is the Western civilisation a feasible project? thus becomes an existential question. The West was never characterized by lack of imagination. And it still has the power to imagine a way out of this crisis. That is: if people discuss it radically, not only on the surface, (as if it were an "energy crisis"). This paper wants to be a contribution to such a discussion.